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FILE

NATIONAL

Congress probes the troubling mix of TV and terror

'New form of warfare' calls for choosing sides

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A network official this week looked back on the recent TWA hostage crisis with awe.

"It was spectacular television," he marveled. "Tremendous stuff."

He was right, of course. It was high drama. Thirty-nine hostages. An airplane seized by terrorists. A killing. Beatings. Threats to blow up the plane. Shadowy movements of a US strike team. The White House threatening retaliation. The US fleet steaming off the coast.

ABC-TV interrupted its regular programming with 80 special reports over the 18-day crisis. NBC and CBS had similar records.

It was gripping television. But did the media handle the crisis in the best interests of the hostages, and of the United States? Or were TV ratings the paramount concern?

The crisis now has put TV in the hot seat. CBS, NBC, and ABC are feeling the wrath of Congress, media critics, and some government officials who charge that hyperbole took precedence over balance and substance.

Among the most serious charges:

- TV gave terrorists a platform to espouse their cause around the world.
- TV put the hostages into the untenable position of criticizing US policy in an effort to save their own skins.
- TV emphasis on the human story of the hostages put personal interests above national interests.
- TV played the role of negotiator, attempting to become a conduit for a dialogue between terrorists and the US government.

Media critics charge that because of TV, the final score in this crisis was: Terrorists 10, America 0. We may see new terrorist acts as a result, they charge.

Not so, say TV networks. Television showed the terrorists as brutal people who would kill to reach their goals, say television officials. Further, TV helped get most of the hostages out alive and well, they observe.

Says ABC News president Roone Arledge: "Anybody who thinks they [the terrorists] won the battle for the hearts and minds of America . . . misses the point."

The debate over the media's role in the TWA crisis has now spilled onto the airwaves and into Congress. It has forced TV news chiefs, such as Lawrence Grossman, president of NBC News, and ABC's Mr. Arledge to speak out in their defense.

Television has drawn criticism from unexpected quarters.

Fred Friendly, an ex-TV executive and Edward R. Murrow professor emeritus at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, told Congress:

"Terrorism is . . . a species of guerrilla warfare whose battlefield is the television screen and the front page. . . . Tragically, the final result of the imperfections of the coverage of Flight 847 is that TV probably inadvertently advanced the cause of terrorism — encouraged another hijacking, while at the same time, parenthetically, saving the 39 hostages."

Critics this week on Capitol Hill used a flurry of adjectives to describe the faults of TV coverage, as they saw it. They called it "tasteless," "sensationalistic," "tacky," "yellow journalism," "a circus," "a zoo," "an extravaganza," "irresponsible," "a terrorist weapon," "frenzied," and "co-producers with terrorists of hostage drama."

The TV coverage, said Professor Friendly, was "enough to curl your hair." TV was "exploited" by the terrorists, as was the nation, he said.

There are perhaps two major reasons that feelings have run so high.

Rep. Edward F. Feighan (D) of Ohio, who chaired this week's House hearings on TV coverage, says terrorism has become "a new form of warfare." Just as in World War II, the media has a special role to play in this warfare for the good of the nation. It cannot simply be every network and newspaper for itself.

There is also concern that TV, which so strongly portrays emotion and drama, emphasized the human interest to the exclusion of national interests. By focusing on the hostages and their families, TV reduced President Reagan's room for maneuver. The only important goal became: Free the hostages.

Why is that not enough? Lawrence Eagleburger, a former US undersecretary of state, says the government has to think not only about the lives of the hostages, but about the future.

Time magazine critic William Henry noted that TV's emphasis on the human beings involved meant that "the big picture fades into the background."

While not anxious to admit there were any faults in their coverage, some TV officials do concede they have some doubts about elements of their performance.

ABC's Arledge said two complaints may have substance. One was the heavy emphasis on the families, which may have narrowed the President's options. The other was the successful effort by the terrorists to equate the TWA hostages with the Shiite soldiers being held by Israel. ABC and others created the idea of "moral equivalence," critics charge. Arledge concedes that was a problem.

Network officials, some speaking privately, also admit there were too many special reports. They concede there were also too many interviews with hostage families. And they admit that too much time was sometimes given on the evening news broadcasts to the crisis.

NBC, which launched a study of its own coverage the day after the crisis, quickly points to another mistake. Mr. Grossman said there was too much publicity about its "scoops" and "exclusives" during the crisis. This added to the atmosphere of hype.

What more can be done? Self-restraint is the key, say critics. Professionalism, not show business or ratings, must be paramount at times of crisis.

A further word of caution, however, came from Ben Bagdikian, dean of the School of Journalism at the University of California in Berkeley. He said that if one terrorist incident doesn't get enough media attention, the terrorists will simply escalate the violence. Eventually the media will have to cover it, he said.